

Bigfoots I Have Known  
By Barrett Schmanska  
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*For my wife, Heiði*

*There is a yeti in the back of everyone's  
mind; only the blessed are not haunted by it.*

*Lama Surya, A Yetí Tale*

**I have changed the names of certain people and I have modified certain events to protect privacy. Nevertheless, the story you are about to read is pretty much all true.**

**Barrett Schmanska**

# *Chapter 1*

I remember the day I met John Andrews. I sat reclined in my office cubicle gazing down out at the rooftops of Everett below. The brilliant blue sky appeared nearly black through the tinted window. The sun's molten center lingered on the glass, its fiery tentacles reaching in all directions. I positioned myself comfortably behind an old potted plant to avoid the glare and stared north toward the snow-capped Cascades. They emerged from the horizon proudly, like a collection of rock crystals on a shelf. Mount Baker and Glacier Peak appeared almost touchable. In the foreground, white smoke bellowed up, then sideways from the Weyerhaeuser paper mill just north of town. The old mill was a monument to Everett's past, when it was a tough union town that survived on timber and whiskey.

My daydreaming was interrupted by a cluster of co-workers chattering away next to my cubicle. Not one to miss out on office gossip, I slowly turned around in my chair and perked up to listen. They were discussing a new employee, John Andrews. Mr. Andrews was reputed to be a believer in "Bigfoot," the great mythical simian creature rumored to live in the dark, uninhabited forest of the Pacific Northwest. Even more amusing, it was known that Mr. Andrews would often embark on grand mini expeditions in search of Bigfoot throughout the Pacific Northwest. This, of course, drew guffaws from my co-workers.

"That John Andrews...He's been on this Bigfoot trip for twenty years, but never found a thing except a few footprints," I heard emerging from the gaggle.

The government office was largely staffed with middle-aged baby boomers that had migrated to the Pacific Northwest from all over the country as free-spirited young men and women of the sixties. Many came in search of a nirvana-like, back to the earth existence. Occasionally, the vernacular of the generation would pop up in conversation, especially when there was excitement in the air.

"I heard Andrews climbed Mount Baker in Converse high tops...chasing Bigfoot!" They all carefully controlled their laughter.

I waited for the crowd to disperse back to their cubicles, and then sneaked over the water cooler to catch a glance of Mr. Andrews. Hunkered over his desk, I could see only his profile. I saw enough to see a full head of wavy graying hair parted to the side, like that of Robert Redford in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. Even from the back I could see that John Andrews was in excellent physical shape, unlike the paunchy bureaucrats throughout the office. John was not particularly tall, but his back muscles sloped over the desk, framing his spine. Later that day, I wandered over to introduce myself.

"My name's Barrett," I said boldly peering over the cubicle wall.

"Hi there," John responded quickly. "Sorry I haven't been by to introduce myself. I thought the boss was going to peddle me around the office and do some introductions, but I guess not."

"Not a problem," I said. "I just thought I'd say hello."

We shook hands as he emerged from his desk. Despite lines that come from middle age, John had the fresh, chiseled look of a young man just setting out in life. His teeth were slightly yellowed and fashionably knurly, like those of David Letterman. He dressed in classic secondhand store fashion, pants that fit too tight around the waist, but loose at the bottom with faded hem lines that had been set at least twice. His appearance was bereft of any identifiable style, but he was neat and clean.

"So, what do you do here in government?" I asked curiously.

"I'm here on a consultant contract to work with the farmers," John said. "All these new people moving out here from Seattle are complaining about the stench from sewer lagoons. Dairy farmers have dumped cow waste in man-made waste lagoons for years. Now all of a sudden, it's a problem with the new suburbanites," he said shaking his head. "The County Executive needs some solution...preferably a sound bite to feed the papers," he said grinning.

"Do you live in the country?" I asked politely.

"I live on Camano Island with my wife and two kids," he responded quickly retreating to his chair to watch the sun emerge high on the horizon.

"We've got a nice home looking over the Sound. Nothing fancy, but comfortable."

"The office is buzzing about your famed belief in Bigfoot," I blurted out no longer able to control my curiosity.

John laughed.

"Yes. Well, I've got my beliefs, and they have theirs. I've seen things. That's all really."

"Done any hiking in the Cascades?" he asked squinting out the window.

"Well, no," I sheepishly responded. I was relatively new to the Pacific Northwest and was unsure about exploring the steep cliffs I could see from my window.

"Well, we should go on a hike sometime. I know some great hikes that we could do in a day or a weekend at most," John explained.

"I'd like that," I said.

"Sure is a nice day, isn't it?" John said, peering out the window at the Cascades in full bloom. "I hate being inside on a day like this."

I sensed John's frustration with being cooped up inside the sterile, boring office environment on a beautiful day. We worked in fabric and steel cubicles aptly described as "veal fattening pens" by Douglas Coupland in his book *Generation X*. The older office workers taped pictures of their spouses and children to the fabric walls. The younger workers had more hip cubicle decorations, like posters of Seattle rock bands stolen from downtown telephone poles. As a young man recently out of college, I feared the possibility of spending the rest of my work life

in a cubicle in front of a computer, regardless of how it was decorated.

Each day driving to and from work, my eyes would veer curiously east toward the Cascade Range. At work, my breaks would involve staring out the window nursing a cup of coffee with my feet up on the windowsill, dreaming of flowered meadows and icy creeks. Despite my lifelong fear of heights, I felt drawn to explore the mountains.

I was a recent transplant to Seattle from the East Coast and lived by myself in a boarding house on Green Lake. Green Lake was, and is today, an immensely popular Seattle park that boasts a walking trail that circumnavigates the lake. On sunny days, walkers, and runners joust with roller bladers and bicyclists, performing a dance that rivals the most

popular boardwalks in America.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the Greenlake neighborhood was known for biker bars, drug houses, hippies, and political malcontents. It was a place to avoid. But by the early 1980s, Seattle's economy was starting to feel the profound impact of Microsoft money, and quicker than one can say urban renewal, Greenlake had been gentrified.



I loved Greenlake but was equally smitten with downtown Seattle. I would join the hordes of people at the fish market on weekends, wander the streets, browse the trendy bookstores, and record stores, and generally soak in "the scene." The national media referred to Seattle as "the most livable city in America" because of its cozy ambience and friendly people. Even *National Geographic* profiled the city on its cover and described Seattle as "Mayberry with tall buildings."

The city was awash in young people who were at the forefront of American popular fashion and music. Rock bands with names like Green River and the Screaming Trees played to packed bars in Pioneer Square. Fledgling computer and biotechnology companies were emerging in and around Seattle, bringing a modicum of wealth to the city. Despite the new money, Seattle retained its laid-back attitude, cozy atmosphere and took pride in its historic roots as a timber and fishing town. The newcomers embraced Seattle's civility and connection to the natural world, skipping work to go kayaking, biking, or hiking.

At the office, John and I became good friends. I would visit John's cubicle, enamored with his animated descriptions of hikes we could do on the weekends. John would unfurl a US Forest Service map of the North Cascades and point to remote lakes we might visit on our journey. He would occasionally spice up his description of the hike with a quick story about a Bigfoot sighting, large footprints on a gravel bar, or a patch of forest seemingly destroyed by the great ape staking out territory.

"That's steep country in there, but we could get by without ropes," he said one late Friday afternoon pointing at a map of the Pickett range. Most of the bureaucrats had abandoned the office, leaving only a few to watch the clock.

"But now look at this!" he said enthusiastically pointing south of the Picketts.

"I bet we could get back to this Cub Lake without ropes. It's a hump, but I bet we could do it in a day. The country in there has got to be spectacular! Back in there...now that's Bigfoot country!" he said eyes aglow.

"I don't like taking ropes or crampons," John explained folding the map. "I always carry an ice axe and snowshoes, but no climbing hardware.

No wands, pitons, hammers, tools, or helmets... I don't want to spend my weekends plastered to a rock face, dodging falling rocks and trying to fit a piton in a crack. I like to get into the high country and wander the ridges. You know? See the country. When I get cliffed out, I try to work around it, but if not, I just head back home," he explained.

"Barrett! You're gonna meet up with the hairy female Bigfoot out there! And she's gonna carry you off to her cave!" howled Brent Caldart, the County Cartographer from behind the morning newspaper. Brent was eavesdropping on our conversation. We were in Brent's territory, and he was annoyed.

Brent stood five foot nothing with short, cropped hair and round glasses. He reminded me of Arte Johnson from the old *Laugh-In* television show appearing out from behind a potted plant, murmuring "verrry inteesting." Brent quickly covered his face up with the paper when I turned to confront him.

"You are a funny man, Brent," I replied sarcastically.

"Keep your head down out there, kid," said Stacey Rizzo, another Cartographer as he walked over to see what maps we were viewing. Rizzo was always nervous about other staffers looking through *his* maps, as he called them.

"Bigfoot's got the advantage of height and smell! Bigfoot can smell you coming from miles away! So don't wear deodorant or after-shave." Rizzo quipped. Caldart chuckled in sympathy.

"I'd like to take that Brent out in the woods with me some day," John said as we made our way out of the Cartography section. "He wouldn't last a solitary minute up there. The first cougar scream would send him packing to his car."

Even though I was taking my fair share of abuse, the office seemed to temper its criticism of John. While they thought John's Bigfoot hobby was weird, nobody could dispute that John was a skilled outdoorsman and in great physical shape. Even at the age of 47 or so, John's physical conditioning was legendary among the county's hiking and climbing crowd.

I had been warned two weeks earlier in the elevator of his superhuman leg strength and stamina by Ruth, the office secretary.

“Nobody can keep up with him, that’s why he can’t find any hiking partners,” she explained above the dingy elevator, slowly licking the plastic rim of her latte. “I know of a couple of guys who were suckered into weekend trips with him. He did them in. Many haven’t been hiking since,” she explained in her usual ominous, deadpan way.

We passed by the break room, and I decided to grab a soda pop out of the refrigerator.

“So, John,” said Nancy Claymore in the break room as she waddled over to the snack machine. “How come nobody has ever found a skeleton of this Bigfoot? Wouldn’t that settle it? It’s hard to believe there’s no bones out there some place. Bring us some Bigfoot bones to our next staff meeting and I’ll bring the cookies!” she giggled.

John had an odd way of responding to the skeptics. He talked swiftly, engaging the unbeliever in a bizarre story, told with the seriousness of a courtroom lawyer addressing the jury.

“Bigfoot buries his dead deep in mountain caves, in places no human could reach. Places far off the climbing routes. I have yet to witness it, but people have seen Bigfoot carry his deceased up steep glaciers without stumbling a bit, one leg stride after another as if he were walking across a school ball field.”

Nancy left rolling her eyes.

John was a Christian Scientist and being considered unconventional was nothing new. He was serious about his faith, but no zealot.

“You ever been to the doctor?” I asked John one day.

“One time,” he responded. “I slashed my thumb with an ice axe in Canada and needed some stitches. The doctor fixed it up quite nice. Our family avoids the medical establishment for healing, but seeing a physician isn’t a sin. Our church doesn’t ostracize anybody for going to a medical doctor. We strive to find perfect health through our spirituality, and I believe it is achievable. But sometimes we simply don’t make it. And it’s OK,” he explained.

“So, are we ready to go this weekend?” John wondered aloud. “The weather’s supposed to be excellent, a few high clouds in the morning that should burn off by afternoon...perfect for hiking,” he explained.

"I'm ready. I've been jogging twice around Green Lake every day, so I'm ready...I think I'm ready, anyway," I said cautiously.

"You need to get a backpack. Ever worn snowshoes?" he asked.

"Nope" I responded.

"Well, you can get some great snowshoes these days at Swallows' Nest, over by your apartment in Seattle. All you do is strap them on and start walking," he explained.

The idea of donning a backpack and marching into the woods on a pair of snowshoes brought my excitement level up to the dizzying heights of the mountains themselves. Especially the idea of carrying all my necessary earthly possessions on my back. Now that was freedom.

The next day I walked over to the Swallows' Nest, a small outdoor gear store on the southern edge of the Wallingford neighborhood on the shores of Lake Union. I thought the Swallows' Nest was the neatest store on the planet. It sat high off the ground in a converted warehouse overlooking the lake. Wooden stairs reached up to the entrance. Inside, the floor creaked under the weight of footsteps. It smelled of old wood and lake algae. The one room store was filled with the latest gear for the budding backpacker.

I spent considerable time looking over the shiny pitons, picks, helmets, ropes, gloves and other climbing paraphernalia. I squinted at the store's wall posters portraying the tortured torsos of men and women climbing ice falls and rock faces.

"Can I help you?" asked a young woman, about five years my junior, probably a college student. She had straight black hair, big brown eyes and no makeup, reminiscent of the seventy's college feminist look. She wore classic Seattle-style hiking boots and blue shorts with a built-in belt that clasped in the front like a strap on a backpack.

"Yes, sure," I responded with my best casual persona. "I'm going hiking tomorrow for the first time and need a few things...like a backpack and some boots. And some snowshoes too."

"Good Lord! That's a lot of gear to try out in one day," she responded. "You'll shred your feet on a long trip with new boots. I'd suggest buying something like this if you're not going alpine," she said

kicking her leg up and showing off her boots made of supple, synthetic fabric. “They’ll be easier on your feet than leather boots. Do you want to try on a pair?”

“Sure,” I responded.

She disappeared into the back, and I decided to look over the backpacks. A pretty girl like her probably had a boyfriend. I imagined him as a stealth rock climber who wore a ponytail and had strong feelings about the environment. They probably climbed the peaks of Monte Cristo and frequented Seattle’s coffee houses to graze on vegetarian faire. I could see the two of them at a table reading the New York Times, shaking their heads about logging in the Amazon and Africa.

“Those are external frame packs you’re looking at,” she said emerging from the shoe stacks sooner than I anticipated. “They’ll sit high on your back and will catch on vegetation. You’ll want an internal frame pack that sits low and snug,” she explained patiently, pointing me to another batch of backpacks on the opposite wall.

I found the correct low profile internal frame pack that appeared like an old Navy duffel bag with shoulder straps. It fit nice and comfortable. I loaded it up with old gymnasium weights and walked up and down a set of wooden stairs that went nowhere.

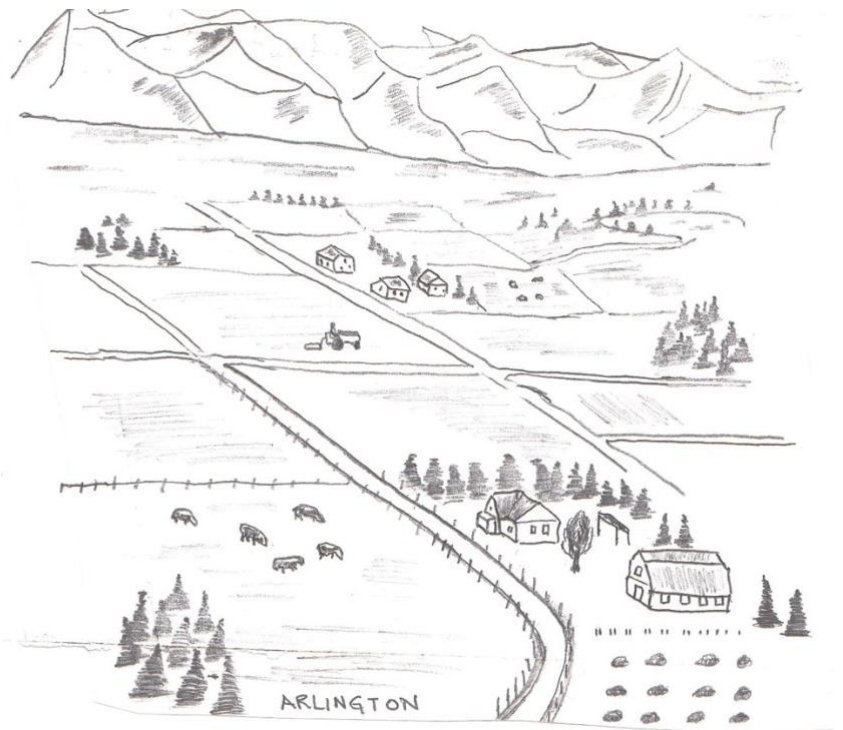
They say the most exciting moment in all of sports is right before the start of a professional boxing match. The boxers get their gloves fitted, robes are discarded, they stretch out on the ropes, and jump around a bit before the bell is rung. The arena is electric with excitement. That’s how I felt trying on all my gear. I walked up and down the makeshift stairs, bounced a few times on the wood floor, shifted my body this way and that, all the while feeling the rush of anticipation and excitement of the pending adventure.

I selected a pair of aluminum frame snowshoes with leather weaving. A metal claw was bolted into the bottom of the shoe, ready to grab ice if needed. I also picked up a backpack, hiking shoes, a flashlight, a wool hat, and Goretex gloves.

“I guess I’ll take all this stuff,” I said pleased with my selections. I thanked the clerk and made my way out into the chilly Seattle drizzle.

That weekend, I met John at the Stanwood/Camano Island Park and Ride lot just off of Interstate 5. He explained that we were headed for the Suiattle River in the Cascade National Park. We were to park at the Downey Creek trailhead and hike approximately 11 miles to Cub Lake.

On the way to the national park, we passed a number of dairy farms. The landscape was majestic, filled with dairy cows, crop farms, old barns, haystacks, and meandering creeks. We were approaching Arlington, a town built



on logging and dairy farming. At the time, real estate developers were attempting to buy up several farms and build a new amusement theme park. John had read about this in the paper and complained about it for some time as we traveled the winding road.

"The Northwest is changing, Barrett," he said. "These farmers are getting old and want to sell their farms off to developers."

I nodded in agreement.

"You can hardly blame the farmers," John continued. "They've spent their whole lives juggling weather, commodity markets, and farm subsidies. They just want to spend their final years where it's warm and comfortable, in Phoenix or some place like that. The farmers want to sell their fields, developers want to build in those fields – no politician's going to stand in the way of that. They'll be building up against the mountains soon. There's no stopping it, especially with the highway bringing people up from Seattle," John concluded as we passed a road-side vegetable stand set up in an old barn.

Interstate 5 was finished sometime in 1971, relatively late in the history of interstate development in America. Before the construction of I-5, the old Pacific Highway had been the only major north/south arterial in western Washington. It served its time well, allowing travelers to traverse the state from Canada to Oregon with ease. But by the mid 1960s, the Pacific Coast Highway was congested with drive-in burger joints, gas stations, hotels, and restaurants catering to the newly burgeoning car culture. Traveling the highway was notoriously slow. The new interstate went a long way in relieving the congestion, but it also opened up vast tracts of land to development.

Washingtonians talk of the days before the interstate highway with a sentimental yearning for the Washington of their youth. Even those in their forties today can still remember Western Washington “before the Interstate came.” They point to lakes where expensive homes have replaced summer cabins; barren, straightened drainage ditches that once teemed with salmon and giant salamanders; and mall parking lots that have replaced the wood lots and tree forts of their childhood.

“I’m not sure how I feel about all these people moving out here,” John said thoughtfully. “I can remember when Bigfoot sightings were common, almost routine, out here in the foothills. Now somebody sees a shadow, or a toe print and it makes the papers,” he said. “I think Bigfoot is retreating further back into the Cascades.”